DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 604 SP 034 827

AUTHOR Tyler, Barbara
TITLE At Risk Students in a Whole Language Classroom: A Naturalistic Inquiry.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; Educational Philosophy; Elementary School Students; Grade 1; *High Risk Students; *Instructional Effectiveness; Language Arts; *Language Experience Approach; Naturalistic Observation; Primary Education; Reading Instruction; *Teaching Methods; *Whole Language Approach; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine how retained first grade students function in a whole language classroom after meeting with failure in a traditional first grade setting. Data collection for the five retained students, plus six "at-risk" students, involved naturalistic observation. Reading began from language experience stories that the students dictated to the teacher. Writing stories began by drawing a picture, writing a story about it, reading the story oneself, and then reading the story to another. Students experienced success when they were reading from predictable books, but found reading from basal readers to be laborious. Traditional test scores revealed that all of the retained and "at-risk" students were on or above grade level at the end of the school year. The paper concludes that the success of the classroom is a reflection of the teacher's philosophical belief that all children can learn when the environment is conducive for learning and when the students are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning. The paper also concludes that when students can function in an environment that encourages risk taking and when the curriculum is adjusted to meet the needs and interests of the learner, success will follow. (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 363 604

AT RISK STUDENTS IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A NATURALISTIC INQUIRY

Barbara Tyler

A whole language program builds on existing knowledge of the learner. It does not presume that all students come to school having the same background and experience. Newman (1985) states that whole language is a philosophical stance. It is not a method or an approach that can be packaged or purchased. It is the belief that many teachers and researchers hold about child development, philosophy, and curriculum. Goodman (1986) suggests that literacy is an extension of the natural whole language learning where the program strives to create an environment with social transactions being encouraged and the reading and writing developing from the need of the individual learner. Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) further support the social transactions of the learner to be an important aspect of literacy development. Students need to be exposed to and involved in opportunities to use and manipulate various forms of language. With research identifying classroom situations that allow students opportunities to be involved with language, (Atwell, 1983, DeFord and Rasinski, 1986) the student processes of learning become important features of a whole language classroom. It is the processes of the students and how they reshape existing knowledge to

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B Tyler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SP034827

create new meaning that are dominate features of a whole language classroom. In extending present knowledge into meaningful situations, the students in this study were able to extend their ability to process information into the world in which they live while maintaining their own identity.

How do students with limited experience or success function in a whole language classroom and how do they fair in relation to students with greater experiential backgrounds who have not met with failure? These are broad based questions that emerged as an important focus of the ethnographic study of a whole language classroom. The purpose of this study was to determine how retained first grade students function in a whole language classroom after meeting with failure in a traditional first grade setting.

Douglass (1985) suggests that without formal hypotheses to predispose the search, one is not only free but obligated to follow the path that holds most promise for disclosure of the truth. Early in the study, patterns of learning emerged and characteristics of individual processes were dominate. Students that were determined `at risk' in the classroom exhibited similar learning patterns to those who had previously been retained. These patterns of learning differed from the average and above

average student. It is these differences in learning that will be discussed.

METHOD

Setting and Informants

The setting for this naturalistic research was a public school first grade whole language classroom located in a small rural East Texas community of approximately 3,600 people. Five of the 21 students in the classroom were retained in first grade. These five students had previously been instructed in a traditional classroom setting.

Nineteen of the 21 students were in the school system during the previous year. Fourteen students were in kindergarten while five were in the traditional first grades. None of the students had previous experience in a whole language classroom. In addition to the five retained students in the classroom, six of the students were identified at the end of their kindergarten year as being `at risk' students. Even though they were identified as being `at risk', their scores on the California Achievement test administered at the end of their kindergarten year were not low enough for the students to be placed in the transitional first grade program. The transitional first grade program was provided by the school district for students identified as needing more help with academic tasks. Even though their test scores were extremely low, there was room

for only 12 students in the transitional first grade program and these six students scored better than the 12 students placed in the program.

The classroom was chosen because it was a whole language classroom. The teacher believed that oral language, reading, and writing were inseparable in a students literacy development and should not be taught in isolation or segmented parts. Reading and writing in the classroom began with oral communication and progressed with the individual student. Beginning reading evolved from written products of the students. No supplementary workbooks were used for instruction and no time limitations were placed on reading and writing.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved a naturalistic observation in the classroom for a minimum of five hours weekly, two days a week during one school year. The focus of data collection unfolded as the researcher began to develop tentative hypotheses about events within the classroom. The techniques for data collection were refined as the researcher moved through four phases of collection. In the first phase, the researcher entered the classroom with the intent of observing and negotiating the role of participant observer with the children and teacher. The second phase of research focused on collecting data and developing tentative

hypotheses about the classroom environment and students' reading and writing within the classroom. Data collection techniques consisted of field notes taken from classroom observations, videotapes recorded at the beginning, middle, and end of the year, tape recordings of story retellings and weekly collection of pen pal letters and story journals. The comparative analysis of retained and non retained students working in the same classroom were developed during this phase. The third phase involved the researcher leaving the classroom setting to analyze the data and develop hypotheses. During the fourth and final phase of research, the researcher re-entered the classroom to test findings through member checks, classroom observations, and a final video taping.

Data Analysis and data collection were continous and intertwined in the study. Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest that "data analysis is not an inclusive phase that can be marked out as occurring at some singular time during the inquiry". They further suggest that data analysis must begin with the very first data collected. The researcher depended on continuous data analysis to aid in formulating tentative hypotheses about text strategies employed by students in this whole language classroom. Further analysis allowed the researcher to form hypotheses about how retained students used and developed text strategies.

RESULTS

The classroom

The classroom was one in which each student was valued and appreciated for their efforts. A great deal of time was spent by the teacher in understanding each child. The basic belief of the teacher that all children can learn when the environment is conducive to learning echoed throughout the classroom. The teacher allowed the students to explore and participate in a wide variety of learning activities while relating each learning situation to real life and extending the learning to be meaningful to each individual student.

Within the classroom, the students were motivated by many opportunities to explore, grow, and experience success. Needs and interests are important motivational factors. The students became confident in their own abilities aslearners as their needs and interests were met in the classroom. The students researched projects of interest and worked with activities which they felt important. The students were given opportunities to engage in collaborative efforts with peers with similar interests and to learn from one another. The teacher was understanding of the social needs of the individual students. Social transactions within the classroom conveyed trust, belonging, and respect

of others. The five-point self check system for students' writing was designed to allow for social transactions and collaborative efforts for all students. Since writing is a personal endeavor, the social transactions of brainstorming about ideas for a written piece were important. Not only did it allow for getting feedback from peers, it allowed students to share ideas aloud before they were written on paper. It allowed for organization of thoughts and a means for refining the thought processes. Readings of one's written works to another were part of the checking system for writing in the classroom. The readings fulfilled the need to say to peers that their own works could be read and their ideas were important enough to be shared. Sharing of self and getting feedback from peers are important aspects of making students feel important and accepted, as well as belonging in the environment.

The classroom environment was a consistent, safe place for students to take risks and test forming hypotheses about their learning. The teacher's expectations of student performance communicated how they are expected to perform. A daily task board set forth daily expectations of work to be produced. The students had the choice of task to select to work first, but the board was a visual reminder of the daily expectations for them to grow for learning. The students found they could

incooperate several tasks at a time to fulfill the expected outcome and succeed in the task. Expectations of success did not lead to competition in the classroom. The students were encouraged to work together to be successful. Prewriting conferences in the classroom enabled the students to work together to formulate ideas for writing. The end product of students working together was viewed as cooperative learning. Partner reading was another example of cooperative learning within the classroom which allowed for success and enhanced the self-esteem.

Reading and Writing of retained and at-risk students

Reading began for the at-risk students from language experience stories they dictated to the teacher. Students were encouraged once they realized their own verbal words could be put in print and then reread. The students began reading their language experience stories with assistance but quickly moved to independent reading of these stories. With success of reading and reading their own stories, they often felt it necessary to revise words, and sentences. Through revision the students saw their own work taking a form which could be read and appreciated by others. Being appreciated by others was the key to motivation needed for many students.

The need to be appreciated encouraged the at-risk student to attempt writing stories on their own. The writing attempts were well

received by peers. Writing was a difficult task for many of the at-risk students. Actual writing episodes for story writing began by drawing a picture of two or more figures. Once the figures were drawn, the student would orally retell information relating to the picture. Sharing their picture with others allowed them processes to organize thoughts for a story and focus on precise words they wanted to write. These students progressed from oral retelling of the picture to recording letters to represent words. As the students recorded letter and word representations, they would go back to the drawing and add a detail to correspond to words they had written. The students often reread their own written work to recall their intended message and decide what word to write next. The students actually produced the full illustration and story simultaneously. Their total thoughts clearly unfolded as they put pen to paper.

Risk taking was difficult for many of the at-risk students. They learned to take a risk by being allowed to go back into their work and add to their drawing. The students were guided by a five-point self check system designed to guide all writing in the classroom. Step one of the self check system stated for students to "Draw your picture" and step two stated "Write your story". These students pursued the two steps

simultaneously. Step three and four of the self check system allowed for "read your story to yourself and then read your story to another". This allowed all students to gain confidence with their reading and writing. Once they gained confidence regarding reading they were able to transfer their skills to printed books. Students were able to recognize words they used in their own stories were also used by book authors.

The at-risk students felt most successful reading from predictable books. Free choice reading would find the students reading and rereading a favorite predictable book. Although the students were successful with beginning reading attempts using predictable material, stories they wrote did not have a predictable, repetitive pattern. From the beginning of the year, it was clear through observation of written works that the students did not have the schema of the reading-writing connections.

The students were encouraged to read and write in many forms throughout the school year. As the students became comfortable with their environment and school surroundings, their academic performance began to change. Reading from a basal reader was laborious for the at-risk students. As the students gained control of the reading processes, they became overly concerned with words they did not know in a basal. This concern did not appear when they read from their own written work

or from a predictable book. When reading a story from the basal reader, the students were encouraged to skip the unknown word, guess at the word, ask someone for help, or try to sound it out. This did not seem encouraging for the students and they soon developed their own self correcting strategies for use when reading from the basal. The students used what will be referred to as the 'touch strategy' when reading aloud from the basal. When encountering an unknown word the student would touch the hand of the teacher and point to the word. As they pointed to the troublesome word, the teacher would instantly pronounce the word for them. This allowed the students to continue reading with little or no interferance or break in concentration.

As the at-risk students progressed in the reading process, they developed a second strategy that appeared to lead them to greater understanding of the story. When they missed a word in the story they would read two or three additional words and return to the first of the sentence and reread the sentence in its entirety. They had the need to hear their reading in correct form which made sense to them. As the year progressed and the students became more proficient with reading, storytelling became an important part of the students' reading. The students enjoyed rewriting many of the stories from the basal reader and

adding or changing story ending. The students often chose to verbally retell the story to the teacher or a peer and then extend the story beyond what was read. Their story retellings revealed a strong understanding of story structure as well as details about character, setting, and plot. Toward the end of the year, reading and writing for these students was an ongoing process. They did not make distinction between the two processes. What they read, they were able to write about, then reread. Stories they wrote were read by themselves or by others. They edited their own work independently when necessary and wrote original stories from brainstormed ideas. These students became risk takers in their own writing.

Additional information supports the success of these students reading and writing. Traditional test scores revealed that all of the retained and `at-risk' students were on grade level or above grade level at the end of the school year. The results of the California Achievement Test showed these students scoring from a 2.2 grade level to a 4.2 grade level. The Burke Informal Reading Inventory supported the California Achievement Test scores. The state mandated test of minimal skills provided further verification of the students' success. It was reported by the teacher that every child mastered all three areas of the state

mandated test which included reading, writing, and math.

CONCLUSION

The observations of this Whole Language classroom over a period of one school year have two distinct implications. The first being the success of the classroom is a distinct reflection of the teachers philosophical belief that all children can learn when the environment is conducive for learning and when the students are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning. The second implication reflects the students ability. When students can function in an environment that encourages risk taking and when the curriculum is adjusted to meet the needs and interest of the learner, success will follow. Students left this classroom feeling successful and valuing their own abilities as readers and writers.

Ethnographic research generates hypotheses which are grounded in the context of the situation and data collected. The conclusions are based on findings of particular students in one classroom. While these findings could be applicable to other classrooms, the reader must consider the degree of similarity between their own situation and the context described in this research.

REFERENCES

Atwell, M. (1983). Reading, writing, speaking, listening: Language in response to context. In Ulrich Hardt (Ed.), The Reading with the Other Language Arts. Newark DE: International Reading Association, p. 21-30.

DeFord, D. & Rasinski, T. (1986). A question of knowledge and control in teaching and learning. In M. Sampson (Ed.) The pursuit of literacy: Early reading and writing. Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt, p. 116-125.

Douglass, B. (1985). Heuristic inquiry: The internal search to know. Journal of Humanistic Psychology. 25 (3), 39-55.

Goodman, K. (1986). What's whole in whole language. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.

Harste, J. , Woodward, V. & Burke, C. (1984). Language Stories and literacy lessons. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Newman, J. (1985). Whole language. Theory in use. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.